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Some problems inherent in popular magazine articles concerning reading are discussed, and some suggestions for careful reading of them are given. It is suggested that the reader consider the following questions concerning popular magazine articles on reading: (1) What background does the author have? (2) What number of people have been involved in the research described? (3) What is the dollars and cents cost of the program described? and (4) What critical and analytical reading skills taught to children should be applied to reading the article? (MD)

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# HOW TO READ A POPULAR ARTICLE ON READING

When I first looked at this topic - How To Read A Popular Article On Reading, I immediately thought Oh! they want me to talk about how we add meaning to or delete meaning from what we read as well as what we hear. And the only association or only experience I could apply on the spot to this topic was an experience with a little eight year old neighbor youngster. David was a neighborhood case, if you read my intonation pattern. And one among many things that was driving David's mother mad, was his reading and quoting facts that weren't there, facts that tended to the sensational and to the morbid. For instance, David would say, "Mother did you read the headlines today, 429 men, women and children were killed in an

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airplane wreck in Texas; or Mother, did you read where one boy knifed three girls in Ohio; or Mother did you read today about a man murdering seven people in California?" And always David would tell about blood, about struggles, about horrors.

Finally, in desperation the mother decided to just confront David and ask him if he always believed what he read, although she knew, he wasn't reading what he was reporting. That afternoon as usual David came in, "Mother did you know that 56 airplanes were shot down in Korea?"

His mother looked up from her dishes and asked this question, "David do you always believe everything your read?"

David answered quickly and firmly, "I believe everything I've read and some things I ain't have read."

So, I wondered if this maybe was what the topic was all about not only believing what we read but also adding our own interpretation. And so, I decided I'd give you four wh question transforms that you, as a reader might ask yourself as your read any popular article on reading.

The four wh questions are:

1. What background in reading does this author have?

2. What number of people have been involved in this research?

3. What is the cost in dollars and cents of this reading program?

4. What critical and analytical reading skills is my child taught in reading that I should use in reading this article?

Let's look at wh question No 1. In the past 10 to 15 years the popular magazines have been filled with articles concerning reading. Actually, reading has been extolled with black headlines that at times were sensational. It is healthy and wise that so much attention is being given to the teaching of reading by the general public - but it can be unhealthy and unwise if the attention is focused on unfair research, non proved data, or worse still if the articles promulgate one personality or one technique to the exclusion of all others. Medical men have long had to deal with this problem of what they term "quackery," but it is only in the recent past that reading as a part of the curriculum has been not only a popular lay issue but a controversial lay issue.

It is not uncommon to see write-ups that want to give help to mother in teaching her two year old to read. And mother, particularly if the child is a first, can't help but be anxious to give the program a try, so she sends for the product and promptly begins. The mother may be lucky and do no harm, but her success lies only with luck, not wisdom or good

judgment. One good adage to follow then as a layman is: "If the reading program is a BE all FOR all - Be cautious."

So, with all the attention and space in magazines, newspapers and pamphlets being given to reading, it perhaps behooves the general public to read carefully themselves and to consider carefully some pertinent facts.

The general public might ask first: Why does this writer have the authority to discuss publicly such technical data? What is his background? What are his qualifications?

It is a sad fact of education that some highly publicized reading programs have been developed by non reading specialists. In some instances these programs have value for some aspect of reading, but maybe the person, because of his lack of experience sees only one integral skill of the many integral skills in the learning to read.

It is also a sad fact that sometimes the author is a good writer but an absolute amateur in the field of reading. The author hears about a different reading program; he needs an angle for his writing. He interviews the author and he writes the story to interest his magazine readers, not as a true educator to inform the general public honestly and fairly, but as a writer to tell a good story.

So, the general public needs to find out if the writer is reporting accurately. Is he an active educator, a teacher, a college professor, a reading clinician, a reading specialists? Them, if he is an educator, what are his qualifications as a researcher and evaluator?

It is also a sad fact of education that educators can become narrow in their views, tied to one technique and close minded to any new or better way . . And on the other side of the fence an educator can just as easily climb on a new, shiny band wagon because a novel technique has appeared successful, but has not really been tested in a scientific and research oriented way. So what are the writer's qualifications in research?

Is the writer employed as a specialist in reading, a director of research maybe or just what are the educational qualifications of the educator? Has the writer written for many publications? Has his writings been accepted by national educational publications? Has this writer completed several research projects? In other words these can be criteria developed for use to check the author's educational qualifications.

We can say that the American public in many instances is to blame for the attitudes, the naivety, the gullibility toward all facets of living, including

education. If a public can concoct its own image of a president's wife that is without foundation and decide to accept gossip about one American president and reject the truth about another - then that same public can only be expected to be swayed by articles and sensational stories. The book, Why Johnny Can't Read for instances, started the biggest onslaught of phonics in reading that this world has ever seen - right or wrong!

We forget that an article or a story could have been written for such a simple reason as to satisfy public demands. Editors want to please and publishers want to sell. So sometimes we the public are given what we ask for whether what we are given is good for us or not.

An article can be written by an over zealous teacher or an over-eager beaver, and the report be as honest as the researcher can make it. All of us know individuals who become so enthusiastic they cannot be objective in their judgment. The time of the article, the wording can be clues to credibility. When such phrases as - every child responded 100% . . In two weeks the non-readers could recognize 320 words . . appear in an article, the reader should become somewhat wary.

Now for wh question No. 2: Besides considering the authorship the reader should peruse carefully the size of the sample on which the writer is basing his research conclusions. In actuality articles are sometimes written by a

mother who has worked with her one child. In truth she not only has not had experiences in teaching, but she has not had enough experiences to evaluate the learning. And certainly her evaluation would be colored, biased and subjective.

Sometimes an article concerns a private clinic or school owned by one individual who has developed his own program. This individual cannot make a comparison of reading materials because he uses only his own. In reality, often these programs are not used widely and other research is not permitted.

A school system will occasionally promote a reading program, and because test scores show improvement, will not experiment with other types of programs. Thus the school system appears to be saying, "This program is the best on the market, we are endorsing this program."

When a report is written concerning perhaps 50 classrooms, with experimental groups, a research design followed and comparisons made with matching classrooms, then one may say to himself, "I should take a look at this research. The findings are sure to be meaningful and worthwhile."

Sometimes research is carried on with the accelerated student, yet this is not made quite clear in the report and the statistics appear fantastic. Here again, when gains are reported as magnanimous in just a few weeks, a good rule for all of us to follow is - Stop, Look and Listen carefully . . Then stop again, look again and listen again.

On the other hand a program may be used with the disadvantaged, the slow learner, or youngsters with language problems, and be shown as highly successful. However, this program may not have any real value for the average reader. However, this fact may be disguised in the research report in a popular magazine. So just the numbers of students with whom the program was used is not enough - but where and who are also important. And does the where and who have any direct relationship to your where and your who?

At times, research is conducted throughout the nation with students of varied socio-economic backgrounds, with students varying in mental ability and with student with different reading difficulties. A research design is authoritative, the evaluators are competent, but the results may not be sensational and thus this research does not appeal. And many times a good reading program is lost as far as the general public is concerned and only good reading educators save the program. Because, with varied experience, with know how a reading specialist knows the ingredients that are needed for a good reading program. And it merely becomes the task of matching the student with the needed reading ingredients.

Besides the background of the author of the popular magazine article being of utmost importance and besides the where, the who and the how many conducting the research being highly important, another vital point that sometimes is misleadi

to the public is the cost of the reading program to schools. This brings us to wh question No. 3. What is the cost in dollars and cents of this reading program?

We recently had an experimental reading program in our State, we carried on two year's research. This program included all the ingredients of a good program - listening, speaking, reading, writing activities, paperbacks, kinesthetic approaches, creative activities, listening stations, viewing mechanisms, reading mechanisms - in other words the works. Besides all this, individual study booths and individual reinforcement activities were provided for, But this program was determined by the county as being too expensive per pupil. You may say, "This is false economy," and you may be right. Yet if the money isn't there, it is difficult for educators to operate that program.

So an excellent research paper could be written by capable educators concerning this particular reading program, yet very few counties in our State can afford this and maintain the other facets of the curriculum. This research could also be translated into popular magazine language and no doubt work up enthusiasm amid the general public, but perhaps only 20% of our school systems in the U.S. could afford such a program, even with federal monies being provided.

Of course, if our teachers understood and had the time, they could incorporate all these ingredients and many, many teachers do. However, in being realistic we know that some teachers do not have the background and experience.

And now for wh question No. 4: I looked into some professional books on teaching critical reading and I found techniques on how to teach such analytical reading skills as these at the junior high level, knowing fact from fiction, detecting propaganda, checking accurate sources, having a questioning mind, locating and evaluating information, recognizing connotations or denotations of thought, having valid information and I couldn't help but decide that after all - maybe these were the skills we needed to use in reading these popular articles. Skills that our youngsters are learning and one of the reasons that they don't have David's attitude. "I believe everything I have read and some things I ain't have read."

We criticize our youngsters for being inquisitive, for being skeptical but maybe we should develop some of the naivete, some of their blithe questioning spirit.

We educators don't read and interpret well ourselves sometimes, if it is any consolation. Jeane Chall wrote a book recently and I know at times she wishes she hadn't. Because we have used her book to prove or disprove anything concerning reading, from preschool education to phonics.

So I guess - the rule should be - Tread carefully; be sure we are reading critically and analytically.

In summation - Let's look for these items in reading reports on teaching at home or at school.

-- First, consider the writer, his experience and background, his motivation for writing and the styling and tone of the article.

-- Second, consider how much research has been carried on, and the who, where and how many were involved in the research.

-- Third, consider the expense of the program in relationship to what the youngsters need in a total curriculum.

-- And finally consider the analytical reading skills I need to use and be wary of the pitfall of generalizing beyond research data.

The general public cannot be underestimated, their influence is tremendous, but if they are a gullible, an unknowledgeable and an awe stricken general public, they can ring the death bell for education at times. Before ringing the bell, the public should be positive.